DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 357 311 CG 024 862

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TITLE Shame, Guilt and Emotional Intensity in Relation to Family Structure and Process in Late Adolescent Males and Females.
PUB DATE Mar 93
NOTE 12p.; Poster presented at the Biennial Meeting of the Society for Research in Child Development (60th, New Orleans, LA, March 25-28, 1993).
PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Affective Behavior; *College Students; *Emotional Response; *Family Relationship; *Family Structure; Higher Education; Parent Child Relationship; *Sex Differences

ABSTRACT

This study explored relations between emotions (including shame, guilt, and the intensity of positive and negative affects), family structure (alliances between family members and boundaries between family members), and family process (disengagement, enmeshment, and cohesiveness). The sample consisted of either students enrolled in a general psychology college course or their siblings, totaling 52 females and 35 males, aged 18-27 years. Measures of emotion included the Personal Feelings Questionnaire and the Affect Intensity Measure; measures of family functioning included the Family Relations Grid, the Family Characteristics Questionnaire, and the Permeability of Boundaries Questionnaire. Results confirmed that family structure and process, and especially the quality of boundary relationships between family members, related to reported individual affective functioning and to sex differences in affective functioning. Perhaps the strongest findings were that: (1) daughters had more intense affective functioning than sons; (2) mother-daughter boundaries were more permeable than mother-son boundaries or than fathers' boundaries with either daughters or sons; (3) instrusiveness was related to the intensity and sometimes the frequency of both daughters' and sons' affect; and (4) a different aspect of fathers' boundary permeability (interest and concern) in both daughters and sons appeared to modulate affect. Reported affective functioning was related not only to the quality of parent-child dyadic relationships, but to systematic relationships within the family, including the quality of mother-father and sibling-subject relationships. (Author/ABL)

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ED357311

Shame, Guilt and Emotional Intensity in Relation to Family Structure and Process in Late Adolescent Males and Females

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Poster presented at the Biennial Meeting of the Society for Research in Child Development, New Orleans, LA. March, 1993.

ABSTRACT

This study explored relations between emotions (including reports of shame, guilt, and the intensity of positive and negative affects), family structure (alliances between family members and boundaries between family members), and family process (disengagement, enmeshment, and cohesiveness). Sex differences in the patterns of these relations were also analyzed. The sample consisted of either students enrolled in a general psychology college course or their siblings, including 52 females and 35 males, aged 18 - 27 years, of whom 62% were Caucasian Americans, 12% were Asian-American, 6% were Hispanic-American, 2% were African-American, and 18% were non-Americans. Measures of emotion included the Personal Feelings Questionnaire and the Affect Intensity Measure; measures of family functioning included the Family Relations Grid, the Family Characteristics Questionnaire, and the Permeability of Boundaries Questionnaire.

Our results confirmed that family structure and process, and especially the quality of boundary relationships between family members, related to reported individual affective functioning and to sex differences in affective functioning. Perhaps our strongest findings were that (1)daughters had more intense affective functioning than did sons; (2) mother-daughter boundaries were more permeable than mother-son boundaries or than fathers' boundaries with either daughters or sons; (3)one aspect of maternal boundary permeability (intrusiveness) was related to the intensity and sometimes the frequency of both daughters' and sons' affect, including shame and guilt; and (4)a different aspect of fathers' boundary permeability (interest and concern) in both daughters and sons appeared to modulate affect, i.e. the more interested and concerned the father was, the less intense the total and negative affect for daughters and the less frequent the shame for sons. These data thus strongly support Chodorow's (1978) theory that mother-daughter boundaries are more permeable than mother-son boundaries and relate to sex differences in affective functioning.

Reported affective functioning was related not only to the quality of parent-child dyadic relationships, but to systematic relationships within the family, including the quality of mother-father and sibling-subject relationships. For example, the more allied mothers and fathers were with each other, the less shame daughters reported; the more allied daughters were with siblings, the less intense affect daughters reported overall.

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RESEARCH AIMS:

(1)To explore the relations among ADOLESCENT EMOTIONS (reports of shame, guilt, and negative and positive emotional intensity), FAMILY STRUCTURE (alliances between family members and boundaries between family members) and FAMILY PROCESS (family disengagement, enmeshment, and cohesiveness).

(2)To explore SEX DIFFERENCES in:

(a) reported shame, guilt, and emotional intensity
(b) family process and structure and
(c) the patterns of relations between family structure, process, and affect.

Our framework is that emotions develop within a relational context, and reflect inter - and intra-personal adaptations to the quality of relationships with family members, including the degree of differentiation, separation, and connectedness between family members.

HYPOTHESES:

(1) Families characterized by more permeable boundaries and greater enmeshment between adolescents and their mothers and fathers would have adolescents who reported more intense affective experiences and more shame and guilt.

This hypothesis emerges from theoretical literature on shame and guilt, especially the work of Helen Block Lewis (1971). She hypothesized that shame is the vicarious experience of another's scorn and develops in the context of permeable boundaries between self and other. Although guilt has been hypothesized to be a less relational affect (Lewis, 1971), many psychoanalytic and family theorists (Loewald, 1980; Minuchin, 1974) have hypothesized that the developmental task of separation between parents and children necessarily entails feelings of guilt. The structure of some families (e.g. enmeshed) may make separation more difficult and thus produce more guilt on the part of family members.

(2)Families characterized by more cohesiveness would have adolescents who reported more intensity of positive affect and more happiness.

(3)Families characterized by more disengagement would have adolescents who reported less frequent and less intense shame and guilt emotions, but also less intensity of positive affect. Our reasoning was that there would be less guilt around the developmental task of separation, and less shame since self-other boundaries would be more rigid and attachment less strong. However, there would also be less positive affect since relationships were more distant and less engaging.

(4)Mother-daughter boundaries would be more permeable than mother-son boundaries, as hypothesized to Chodorow (1978). Father-daughter and father-son boundaries would be less permeable than mother-daughter and mother-son boundaries.

(5)Females would report experiencing more guilt and shame and more intense affective experiences than would males. This is consistent with many studies (cf. Brody, in press) and with Chodorow's theory that females have more permeable boundaries with mothers, leading to more empathy, more difficulty separating from mothers, and perhaps more intense affective experiences.

SUBJECTS: Fifty-two females, X age = 19.48 years; range = 18 - 27 years
Thirty-five males, X age = 20.43 years; range = 18 - 25 years

Each subject is a student or a sibling of a student in a college general psychology course and has at least one sibling between the ages of 18 and 30. 62% are Caucasian, 12% are Asian-American, 6% are Hispanic-American, 2% are African-American, and the remainder are from countries other than the U.S.

MEASURES:

I. AFFECT MEASURES:

(1)PERSONAL FEELINGS QUESTIONNAIRE (PFQ: Harder & Zalmer, 1990). Yields self reports of the frequency of shame and guilt experienced. There are also three happiness items we scored.

Instructions and Sample items:

Subject places a number from 1 (never) to 5 (almost continuously) reflecting how frequently they experience the feeling:

Shame feelings: embarassment; feeling ridiculous; feelings of blushing
Guilt feelings: worry about hurting or injuring someone; regret; remorse
Happiness: euphoria; mild happiness; enjoyment

(2)AFFECT INTENSITY MEASURE (AIM: Diener, Sandvik & Larsen, 1985). Yields self reports of the intensity of positive, negative, and total affect experienced. We also scored three items involving the intensity of shame/guilt experienced.

Instructions and sample items:

Subject indicates how s/he reacts to events by placing a number from 1 (never) to 6 (always) for each item:

1. Positive affect: When I accomplish something difficult I feel delighted or elated.
I enjoy being with other people very much.
2. Negative affect: Sad movies touch me deeply.
When I get angry it's easy for me to still be rational not overreact.
3. Shame/guilt: I feel pretty bad when I tell a lie.
When I do something wrong I have strong feelings of shame and guilt.
4. Total affect: Mean of all items on the scale

II. FAMILY MEASURES:

(1)FAMILY CHARACTERISTICS QUESTIONNAIRE (FCQ: Bloom, 1985). A self report measure from which we analyzed three factors: family disengagement, enmeshment and cohesiveness.

Instructions and Sample items:

Please rate how characteristic each of the following is of your family by placing a 1 (very untrue) to 4 (very true) next to each item:

1. Disengagement: It was difficult to keep track of what family members were doing; Family members were extremely independent.

2. Enmeshment: Family members found it hard to get away from each other; it seemed like there was never any place to be alone in our house.

3. Cohesiveness: There was a feeling of togetherness in our family; family members really helped and supported one another; we really got along well with each other.

(2) The FAMILY RELATIONS GRID (Copeland et al, 1993). Measures alliances or reciprocal affiliations between pairs of family members. The measure presents four family members in a series of 12 triads and asks subjects to identify which pair in the triad is similar to each other in a way that differentiates them from the third.

Example: MOTHER FATHER SELF — Each of these four is presented three times.
MOTHER FATHER SIBLING
SELF FATHER SIBLING
SELF MOTHER SIBLING

Scores used in the present study included the % of pairs of alliances between the subject and mother, subject and father, subject and sibling, and mother and father, with the divisor being the total number of pairs the subject reported.

(3) The PERMEABILITY OF BOUNDARIES QUESTIONNAIRE (BQ): Olver, Aries, & Batgos, 1989. A self report measure which we modified to derive four scores measuring the quality of subject-mother and subject-father boundaries. Items were averaged which reflected the permeability of negative (intrusiveness) and positive (interest/concern) boundaries for mothers and fathers.

Sample items (same items given for mothers and fathers):
Subject asked to rate how often it has occurred during the last few years from 1 (never) to 5 (often):

Intrusiveness: My mother/father enters my room without knocking; reads my personal papers; goes through my bureau drawers at home.

Interest/concern: My mother/father inquires what I am thinking and feeling; asks to read papers I have written for school.

RESULTS:

SEX DIFFERENCES: Tables 1 and 2 display the means and standard deviations for our affect and family measures for males and females, as well as t-tests exploring sex differences in our measures.

FOR AFFECT:

Compared to males, females reported more intense shame and guilt, and more intense positive, negative, and total affective experiences.

FOR FAMILY MEASURES:

A 2 (sex) x 2 (parent sex:mothers vs. fathers) x 2 (quality of boundaries: negative vs. positive) repeated measures ANOVA revealed that mothers have more permeable positive and negative boundaries with both sexes than fathers do (Main effect for parent sex: $F(1,81)=95.99$, $p < .001$); X for mothers = 2.44; X for fathers = 1.83) and that mother-daughter boundaries are reported to be more permeable than any other types of boundaries between mother and sons, fathers and sons and between fathers and daughters. (Sex x parent sex interaction: $F(1,81) = 6.14$, $p < .02$).

RELATIONS BETWEEN AFFECT AND FAMILY STRUCTURE: Tables 3 and 4 display the Pearson r's for the relations between affect frequency, affect intensity, and family variables.

FOR FEMALES:
(1)The more disengaged the family, the less intense the shame/guilt reported.
(2) The more enmeshed the family, the less frequent the happiness reported.
(3) The more permeable the negative boundaries with mother (i.e. the more intrusive mother was), the greater the intensity of negative affect and guilt/shame reported.
(4) The more permeable the positive boundaries with father (i.e. the more interested/concerned father was), the less the intensity of total and negative affect tended to be.
(5)Alliances:

(A)With Mothers:

- The more alliances reported between subjects and mothers, the greater the intensity of total and positive affect reported.

(B)With Fathers:

- No significant correlations between affect measures and number of alliances reported between subjects and fathers.

(C)With Siblings:

- Alliances reported between subjects and siblings correlated negatively with intensity of positive, negative and total affect.

(D)Between mothers and fathers:

-Alliances reported between mothers and fathers correlated negatively with frequency of shame, with the intensity of shame/guilt and negative affect.

FOR MALES:
(1)The more disengaged the family, the more frequent the reported shame, guilt, and the less frequent the feelings of happiness reported.
(2)The more cohesive the family, the less frequent the reported shame and the more frequent the feelings of happiness reported.
(3)The more permeable the negative boundaries with mothers, i.e. the more intrusive the mother was, the more frequent and the more intense the shame and guilt, and the more intense the total, positive, and negative affect.
(4)The more permeable the positive boundaries with mothers (i.e. the more interested/concerned mother was), the more frequently happiness was reported.
(5)The more permeable the positive boundaries with fathers (the more interested/concerned father was), the more intense the shame/guilt and the less frequent the shame reported, i.e. sons of concerned fathers reported less frequent shame experiences but reported more intense shame when they did experience it.
(5)Alliances: were not significantly correlated with affect measures.

CONCLUSIONS

Our results confirm that family structure and process, and especially the quality of boundary relationships between family members, are related to reported individual affective functioning in adolescents. Our most intriguing and strongest findings are the following:

(1)Our data strongly confirm Chodorow's theory that mother-daughter boundaries are more permeable than mother-son boundaries or than fathers' boundaries with either daughters or sons. Furthermore, the quality of boundaries seems clearly related to the intensity and sometimes frequency of the affect experienced by the adolescent. The directionality of the relationship is unknown (e.g. infant girls may be more affectively intense than infant boys, leading mothers to be more responsive to them). In any case, the results strongly suggest that the etiology of gender differences in the intensity of affective functioning may

stem from gender differences in the quality of parent-child relationships. (The gender differences literature consistently indicates that females report more intense affective experiences than males do, as our data indicated as well.)

(2)Mothers' and fathers' boundaries relate differently to the quality of affect. Mothers' intrusiveness with daughters and sons appears to be highly related to the intensity of both daughters and sons affect, including shame and guilt. In contrast, father's interest and concern in both daughters and sons appears to modulate affect, i.e. the more interested and concerned, the less intense the total and negative affect for daughters, and the less frequent the shame for sons. Interestingly, involved fathers have sons who report less frequent but more intense shame, suggesting an identification with a moral authority.

(3) Family structure relates differently to the quality of affect for males and females. For females, disengaged family functioning relates to less intense shame/guilt, (in accordance with our hypotheses), whereas for males, disengaged family functioning relates to more frequent shame and guilt and less frequent happiness. Other data which may shed light on these findings are that for males, disengaged family functioning showed significant negative correlations (p's $< .05$) with interest/concern on the part of both mothers ($r = -.28$) and fathers ($r = -.33$), whereas for females, these correlations were non-significant. This suggests that males from disengaged families experience less positive relationships with parents than do females, perhaps leading to more negative affective experiences.

Also for males but not for females, cohesive family functioning related to less frequent shame and more frequent happiness, in partial accordance with one of our hypotheses.

(4)Reported affective functioning is determined not just by the quality of parent-child dyadic relationships, but by the systemic relationships within the family. For example, the more allied mothers and fathers were with each other, the less shame daughters experienced; the more allied daughters were with siblings, the less intense daughters' affect was. Alliances between family members who are within the same generation may serve to moderate affect, in accordance with structural family theory (Minuchin, 1974).

Table 1
Means, standard deviations, and t-tests for Emotion Measures

	Females		Males		t-test
	M	SD	M	SD	
Emotional Frequency					
Shame	2.51	.57	2.43	.58	.66
Guilt	2.25	.66	2.21	.52	.33
Happiness	3.35	.63	3.16	.61	1.41
Emotional Intensity					
Shame/guilt	4.16	.89	3.34	.80	4.40***
Total intensity	3.95	.51	3.52	.51	3.77***
Positive intensity	4.07	.59	3.69	.56	3.04**
Negative intensity	3.83	.69	3.22	.56	4.32***

*p < .05; ** p <.01; *** p <.001

Table 2
Means, standard deviations and t-tests for family measures

	Females		Males		t-test
	M	SD	M	SD	
Boundaries[a]					
with Mother	2.58	.55	2.30	.59	2.22*
with Father	1.81	.46	1.86	.51	- .51
Alliances					
Mother-self	.18	.12	.18	.12	.04
Father-self	.21	.16	.17	.10	1.55
Sibling-self	.19	.12	.20	.12	- .24
Mother-father	.09	.09	.12	.10	-1.27
Family Characteristics					
Enmeshment	2.13	.33	2.17	.42	-0.49
Disengage	2.25	.56	2.27	.38	-0.22
Cohesive	3.13	.48	3.17	.48	-0.32

[a] Interest/concern and intrusiveness for mothers tended to be higher for daughters than for sons, $t(82)=1.68$, $p < .10$ for intrusiveness and $t(82)=1.67$, $p < .10$ for interest/concern. For fathers these t-values were not significant, p's > .10.

The higher the boundaries score, the more permeable.

Table 3
Pearson correlations for the relations between family and affect frequency measures[a]

	Shame		Guilt		Happiness	
	F[b]	M	F	M	F	M
Boundaries[c]						
with Mother						
interest/concern	.17	-.11	.13	.07	.09	.48**
intrusiveness	.14	.31*	.04	.64***	-.05	-.13
with Father						
interest/concern	.04	-.28*	.04	-.03	.17	.40**
intrusiveness	-.07	.11	.00	.13	.16	.19
Alliances (FRG)						
Mother-self	.10	.06	-.13	-.10	.15	-.03
Father-self	.06	-.20	.12	-.02	-.04	.04
Sibling-self	.05	.07	-.07	-.11	-.18t	.17
Mother-father	-.19t	-.04	.02	-.07	.13	-.02
Family Structure (FCQ)						
Enmeshment	-.15	-.05	-.03	-.01	-.27*	-.05
Disengaged	.12	.42**	-.05	.26t	.11	-.34*
Cohesive	.08	-.32*	.05	-.14	-.05	.45**

[a] Based on the Personal Feelings Questionnaire
[b] Female subjects N = 52; male subjects N = 35
[c] The higher the boundaries score, the more permeable
* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, t < .10

Table 4

Pearson correlations for the relations between family and affect intensity measures[a]

	Sh/guilt		Total int.		Pos int.		Neg int.	
	F[b]	M	F	M	F	M	F	M
Boundaries[c]								
with Mother								
interest	.18	.16	.10	.15	.11	.23t	.03	-.01
intrusiveness	.24*	.30*	.17	.49***	.13	.42**	.27*	.54***
with Father								
interest	-.07	.56***	-.22t	-.00	-.16	.04	-.19t	.02
intrusiveness	.24*	.27t	.17	.28*	.13	.23t	.27*	.37**
Alliances (FRG)								
Mother-self	.18	-.16	.30**	.02	.30**	.04	.19t	-.02
Father-self	.07	.04	.08	-.15	-.05	-.17	.17	-.03
Sibling-self	-.24*	-.16	-.38**	.15	-.34**	.23t	-.23*	.00
Mother-father	-.22t	.16	-.12	.14	-.05	.12	-.27*	.16
Family Structure (FCQ)								
Enmeshment	.08	.17	-.07	-.04	-.09	-.01	.08	.05
Disengaged	-.31*	-.13	.02	.04	.10	-.01	-.15	.07
Cohesive	.15	.20	-.09	.01	-.16	.09	.13	.01

[a] All affect intensity measures are derived from the AIM
[b] Female subjects N = 52; male subjects N=35
[c] The higher the boundaries score, the more permeable
* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; ***$p<.001$; $t< .10$

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